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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Speech in the context of Miscellaneous

Speaker: Gibson Mr G.D.

Electorate: MORETON
Party: ALP
Government: YES

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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Mr GIBSON (Moreton) (10.56 a.m.)-Last Tuesday, 28 May, I and many other members and senators in this place observed a very moving but simple ceremony which involved the lighting of four candles encased in barbed wire in the foyer of Parliament House. That ceremony marked the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the Amnesty International group. It also marked a very significant point, which has been spoken of by both yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the previous speaker, the honourable member for Dundas (Mr Ruddock), namely, the question of freedom and liberty of peoples around the world, the rights of people to exercise their own political beliefs in a free and just society. These views are not held just by one side or other in this place but are fundamental to the exercise of democracy in Australia. This position is universally held by all members of this Parliament and by most people in this country.

I hope that the message that the ceremony sent out to the people of Australia is that we should not take for granted our freedom, liberty and the right to exercise democratic beliefs, because this is certainly not something that is common around the world. We in Australia have been blessed in that we have not had to struggle to achieve and maintain that right. But many millions of people around the world do not have that freedom, do not have the opportunity to say what they truly believe in and do not have the right to represent others in some form of democratic political forum; and in fact many have suffered greatly through torture, imprisonment, beatings and death for the right to exercise those political beliefs.

It is important for this place, this great institution, this great representation of our democratic institutions in this country, that all four leaders of the political parties in Australia were at the ceremony, to join with other members of the Parliament, to say that we honour those who have suffered and that we fight for their rights and for the rights of all those hundreds of thousands of people all around the world today who are still imprisoned or who suffer because of their political beliefs, and that we do not take for granted our opportunities to exercise political freedom.

Amnesty International is one of many groups throughout the world fighting for political justice and freedom. Amnesty International is strongly supported in this Parliament by all parties-in fact, it is not really a bipartisan group; it is a non-partisan group because it has representatives from all political parties plus independent members of the Parliament. Amnesty International is able to achieve that support in this place and support around the world because it does not pursue any personal or political position. It does not have political views as such. It does not judge the rights and wrongs of particular political causes. It does not take sides in disputes. What it does is take the side of the right of people to exercise political freedom and to have the right to express points of view. That is why it has continued to grow so well over the past 30 years, and it is why it is receiving such strong support in this Parliament today.

I am proud to participate in supporting this motion this morning, because although I am a relatively new member of this Parliament what Amnesty International stands for is the very reason why I sought to come into political office and to represent Australians in this place. Amnesty International represents the exercise of political freedom, and I support that wholeheartedly.

In my time in Parliament, in speeches I have made in this place I have taken up issues of great concern to me, such as the struggles in Sri Lanka, the struggle in East Timor for the freedom of the people of East Timor and the struggle of the people of El Salvador. They are just three examples of places around the world where people do not have the right to exercise political freedom and choice and on which Amnesty International has made comment. But there are many other places around the world besides those three where the struggle continues.

Amnesty International was established in 1961 because of a man's desperation at reading in the paper day after day stories concerning the various causes of people around the world and cases of people being imprisoned or murdered because of their

political beliefs and his frustration and feeling that, as an ordinary citizen, he wanted to be able to do something. He felt that maybe our political structures were not achieving what they should be achieving in taking up those cases. He as an ordinary person wanted to try to do something about it. I think Amnesty International's commencement through the work of Peter Benenson shows that there is a place for ordinary people in this world to take steps to exercise their beliefs and to fight beyond the political structures and to take up issues where they believe that they as ordinary human beings have a point of view to put forward and to try to fight for the rights of others to have a similar right to exercise political beliefs.

It was not something that was started by government or by a political party. It was an ordinary citizen who said, `I am frustrated at what is happening around the world and I want to do something about it'. He captured the imagination of many hundreds of thousands of other people who had similar feelings, including politicians and political parties. But he was the one who was the inspiration, and he continues to provide that inspiration. The strength of Amnesty International is that it is an ordinary citizens' group. It is not a political operatives' group. I would urge ordinary citizens in Australia to exercise the rights that they have in this country-which people in many other countries do not have-to joint Amnesty in fighting for the freedom of others who at the moment find themselves imprisoned or tortured and to take up the challenge that Amnesty International provides to do something positive about it, to write those letters, to take issue with the governments around the world that do not give people the rights to exercise their political freedom.

Australia has also been the recipient of critical reports, and this is something that we should take note of. The honourable member for Dundas made the point that our treatment of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders has created some concern on occasion. The most recent report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody I think confirms the fact that Australia also has a case to answer with regard to the way in which we treat some of our citizens. So, we have no right to be cocky and to lecture others and to say that it is other people around the world who have these problems but that we in Australia are pure and good. I think the Aboriginal deaths in custody report highlights the fact that we also have something to answer for and that we also need to look at our own operations from time to time.

I am only a recent comer to Amnesty International, having joined this Parliament some 14 or 15 months ago, but I am pleased to participate in it. I am honoured to be in a group that has such a proud history. I will continue my work for Amnesty International because I believe it is fundamental to what I believe in and what my political philosophy is: that is, the rights of everyone throughout the world to exercise democratic freedoms and to be able to do that without fear of punishment or imprisonment. It is a pleasure for me to support this motion, and I commend it to all honourable members.